



## News Release

**For Immediate Release**

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### **Brain Injuries Kill One Utahn Every Day**

Utah Department of Health Reports Car Crashes, Falls are Biggest Dangers

**(Salt Lake City, UT)** – Already this year, an estimated 300 Utahns have suffered life-altering brain injuries in car crashes, falls and firearm incidents. And 75 of those injured have died.

According to a Utah Department of Health (UDOH) report, brain injuries are taking a heavy toll on individuals, families and communities. From 1997-1999, 5,533 Utahns suffered traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) severe enough to require hospitalization, and 1,284 (23%) died of their injuries.

“The vast majority of those injured are young males, and elderly Utahns ages 75 and older,” said Trisha Keller, manager of the UDOH Violence and Injury Prevention Program. “Most victims sustain their injuries in car crashes and falls,” she said, “and the real tragedy is that most are preventable.”

Sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Merkley of Davis County suffered a catastrophic TBI in 1996 when she was struck by a car. Merkley was running for track practice when she attempted to cross a 4-lane highway.

“Elizabeth’s head injury was so severe we thought we would lose her,” said her mother, Kathleen Merkley. “She was in the ICU for six weeks, and hospitalized for six months. When she finally came home, it was in a wheelchair. We were all devastated.”

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Elizabeth was in rehabilitation for two full years, learning to walk, talk and do basic daily activities. But her mother says Elizabeth will never really be her old self again.

“Elizabeth is a beautiful young woman, ready to graduate from college this spring. But she still has problems with memory, reasoning, social skills, and intelligence. And her personality is different.”

Elizabeth is much like the estimated 40,000 Utahns currently living with a TBI-related disability. Among the impairments that can result from brain injury are: paralysis, blindness; memory loss; mood swings; reduced ability to make decisions and solve problems, and diminished I.Q. Victims are also often unable to hold down jobs or maintain relationships.

The UDOH data show that males sustain nearly twice as many TBIs as females. Motor vehicle crashes account for half of all TBIs among males under age 60, while falls account for 25 percent. As men and women age, falls become the leading cause of TBIs.

The data also indicate a disturbing trend: for Utah males of all ages, an average 17 percent of traumatic brain injuries are the result of assault and suicide attempts. For adult males ages 30 to 59, 24 percent of TBIs are weapons and assault-related.

To prevent traumatic brain injuries, the UDOH recommends the following:

1. Always buckle up. Make sure children who no longer fit in car seats use a booster seat until they are at least 4'9" tall;
2. Keep your home free of clutter: use non-slip rugs, keep electrical cords out of traffic areas, keep stairs well-lit and use ladders according to manufacturers' instructions;
3. If you have firearms in your home, keep them locked away from children. Keep ammunition separate from weapons;

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4. Drivers should be on the lookout for pedestrians and cyclists and obey all speed limits, especially in neighborhoods and school zones.
5. Pedestrians should always cross at marked crosswalks.
6. Stay fit. Do weight-bearing exercises to keep your bones strong and reduce your risk of falling.
7. Everyone who skis or rides a bicycle, scooter, inline skates or skateboards should wear a helmet.

For more information, contact Cyndi Bemis at 801-538-6348, or visit the VIPP Web site at [www.health.utah.gov/vipp](http://www.health.utah.gov/vipp). For a full copy of the *TBI in Utah* report, [click here](#).

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*The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public's health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.*